

IMPORTANT STEPS TO PREVENT FALLS

By Sharon M. Beall, Nurse Consultant, Bureau of Aging & Long Term Care Resources



In the United States, one of every three people 65 and over falls each year, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The Center also reports that among older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury and the most common reason for hospitalization. Falls are the leading cause of injury deaths among people 65 and over, and the risk of falling increases as one gets older.



People 65 and over are most likely to fall at home (60%) while 30% of falls occur in public places and 10% occur in health care institutions. Fall prevention for the elderly is important because injuries sustained may result in decreased function and fear of falling again may result in loss of independence. Falls may also result in financial burdens that can last for years if dependence on others becomes necessary.

A home safety check is important to prevent in-home falls for older adults. This includes all rooms, the basement and even your yard to identify hazards such as loose carpet or slippery throw rugs, frayed electrical cords, clutter, unsafe steps, poor lighting, uneven ground, etc. A home safety check can assure proper installation of appliances, availability of grab-bars or railings, and that fire extinguishers, smoke and fire alarms are in working order.

Some other factors that increase older adults' risk of falling include problems with gait, balance, muscle weakness and bone disabilities (previous fractures, osteoporosis, arthritis,

etc.). A person's inability to get to the bathroom, having a visual or hearing impairment and needing glasses are other considerations in preventing falls. Wearing improper shoes, slippers, or boots, or being barefoot can result in serious injuries. Using equipment such as walkers, crutches, or canes that are not adjusted properly, or are not used safely, increases the risk of falling.



Medications are another serious risk; many prescription medications are used in conjunction with those that are purchased over-the-counter. Muscle relaxants and medications for sleep (except melatonin), anxiety, depression, nerves, and pain increase the risk of falling. Mixing alcohol with some medications, taking more than prescribed, and alcohol alone may also result in increased risk for falls.

Problems with thinking, memory, dizziness and depression are also reported by researchers to increase falls or result in fear of falling. Chronic conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, stroke, heart or lung disease, poor nutrition, and insufficient non-alcoholic fluids each day may affect strength and physical functioning, resulting in more frailty and difficulty walking or moving from place to place.

You can reduce your risk of falling. Request a copy of the home safety checklist from your county aging office. If you cannot perform it yourself, ask a family member, friend, neighbor or the county aging office for assistance. Take this article to your doctor and talk about your concerns and what you see as your risk. You may be referred to other health care professionals such as dietitians, pharmacists, physical or occupational therapists. **Be proactive now! Consider these risks and decide what you can do to prevent a fall.**

